

2003-04 Warm Water Fish Management Activity Report

Region 1 (Kalispell)

A. Access

1. Designated a 5-acre site with Department of Natural Resources and Conservation on school trust lands on Echo Lake to use as a fishing access. Species available include largemouth bass, northern pike, yellow perch, pumpkinseed, and stocked trout and salmon. Designed a site to include a boat ramp, enhanced parking, latrine, caretaker pad, and improved road. Estimated cost is in excess of \$200,000. Resistance is expected from lakeshore owners.
2. Lake Five: Identified several potential sites to pursue for acquisition. Fish species available include yellow perch and largemouth bass.

B. Research

1. Flathead River northern pike research is ongoing in the 22 miles of Flathead River and associated sloughs upstream of Flathead Lake to determine the impact of northern pike on westslope cutthroat and bull trout. Pike were captured in fyke traps in the sloughs and lower river in 2002 and 2003 for a population estimate and diet analysis. Pike were marked with a plastic spaghetti tag and released. Stomach contents were removed from live fish using lavage techniques to flush the gut and by removing stomachs from angler harvested fish. In 2002, 367 pike were captured; 316 in the sloughs and 51 in the river. Of those fish, 251 were tagged and 47 were recaptured at least once. In addition, 16 adult pike were radio-tagged and subsequently relocated multiple times to determine seasonal movements and distribution. In 2003, 224 pike were captured (207 in sloughs and 17 in the river) and 184 were tagged. A total of 21 tagged fish were recaptured. Rewards were offered for angler returns of tags from harvested pike, over 1/3 of the tags have been returned to date.
The intent is to mark and recapture pike in 2004 to get a population estimate for a third year to use in a bioenergetics model. Results should be reported in late 2004.
2. Spencer Lake largemouth bass age-growth

Forth-eight scales collected from largemouth bass in Spencer Lake were analyzed for age-growth. Spencer is a 32-acre lake north of Whitefish. Bass grew more slowly than bass from the Flathead River sloughs, probably due to a limited forage bass. Five-year-old bass from Spencer only averaged 11.3 inches.

C. Fish Management

1. A creel survey was conducted on the Flathead River from June 2002 to May 2003. The survey included the lower 22 miles of Flathead River and associated sloughs. Estimated fishing use in the lower section was 8,621 hours of fishing or about 278 angler days. Anglers harvested an estimated 575 pike (503 sloughs, 72 river), 484 perch and 10 largemouth bass.

2. Lake Mary Ronan

Three Merwin traps were deployed in Lake Mary Ronan shortly after ice-out to catch and remove yellow perch. The intent is to reduce the numbers of this illegally introduced fish to prevent stunting and reduce competition with salmonids (kokanee catches have decreased 70 percent since perch were introduced). A total of 88,000 perch were netted and 41,000 were shipped live to Fresno Reservoir to rebuild the forage base. Plans for 2004 are to ship all available perch to Fresno Reservoir, Home Run Pond, Dry Bridge Pond, and an Idaho reservoir to provide both fishing and a forage base.

3. Horseshoe Lake (Ferndale)

Spawning was surveyed, particularly in response to habitat (rock) structures placed three years ago. Unfortunately, bass numbers are still low due to a partial winterkill two years ago. Smallmouth bass were planted but fish were hand-sorted to ensure no unwanted species were mixed in.

4. 2004-2007 Fishing Regulations

There was a yearlong process in 2003 to try to condense, simplify, and standardize fishing regulations. Bass in the Western Fishing District have been managed as wild, self-sustaining fisheries. Thirteen lakes had exceptions during the spawning season (May 15 – June 30) to protect bass on beds from harvest with a limit of 1 bass daily and in possession, 22" minimum length to allow a trophy fish to be harvested. The exceptions were replaced by a standard Western District limit to simplify the regulations. The new regulation of 1 bass, 22" minimum is in effect from the 3rd Saturday in May (to reflect opening days on rivers and Lake Mary Ronan) through June. Noxon Rapids Reservoir has a later season of June 15 – July 15 to reflect a later season for successful bass spawning due to runoff in this run of the river reservoir.

5. Noxon Rapids Reservoir Walleye Monitoring

Illegally planted walleyes have periodically appeared in Noxon Rapids Reservoir since 1991. Numbers and distribution of netted walleyes has increased in recent years with 1 caught in 2000, 7 caught in 2002, and 12 caught in 2003. Most worrisome was the capture of an 8" walleye in 2003 which may indicate reproduction has taken place. The concern is that walleyes might jeopardize a native salmonids recovery program in Noxon Rapids and Cabinet Gorge reservoirs and efforts to recover kokanee and manage kamloops rainbow, cutthroat, and bull trout downstream in Lake Pend Oreille. Netting in 2004 will attempt to delineate abundance, distribution, and spawning areas.

6. Illegal Fish Transplants

Reports of illegal fish transplants were documented statewide. The intent is to update the statewide database in early 2004 for public release to educate anglers to stop this harmful practice and support eradication efforts for illegal fish when possible and appropriate.

7. Habitat Structures

Lakes in western Montana are limited by a lack of natural cover and late growth of aquatic vegetation. Recent years of drought have aggravated the situation by decreasing plant growth and exposing woody debris where it deteriorates or is removed by lakeshore owners. Artificial habitat such as Christmas tree bundles work well but deteriorate quickly. Commercial habitat structures are durable and effective but cost over \$100 each. We built and placed structures in Spring, 2004 using extruded black plastic diamond weave fence. The structures were 3' x 4' x 3.5'. We also built artificial weed beds using strips of green plastic snow fence.

Docks are one of the predominant structures on many lakes. We plan to enhance docks by hanging snow fence curtains on a PVC pipe frame secured under the dock to convert them from two-dimensional to 3-dimensional structures. The structures will rise and fall with the docks and so remain effective in varying water levels. All the structures should be extremely durable and cost only \$15-\$20 each. Designs and materials lists are available from Jim Vashro, Region 1 Fisheries Manager.